

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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SIL-01 LAB-04 /055 W

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8086

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 00623

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PDEV, PINT, UK

SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: GOVERNMENT IN TROUBLE AS COMMONS
DEBATE BEGINS

REF: (B) LONDON 18451; (B) LONDON 452

SUMMARY - AS DEBATE ON GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION WHITE PA-
PER BEGAN JANUARY 13. IT BECAME STARKLY APPARENT THAT
PARLIAMENTARY SENTIMENT IS STRONGLY AGAINST MEANINGFUL
DEVOLUTION OF POWER TO SCOTLAND AND WALES. WILSON, AC-
CORDINGLY, IS IN AN EXTREMELY DIFFICULT POLITICAL POSI-
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TION, FACED WITH, ON THE ONE HAND, A REBELLIOUS HOUSE OF

COMMONS AND, IN THE OTHER, A RAPIDLY DETERIORATING POLITICAL BASE IN SCOTLAND. FOR THE TIME BEING, WE BELIEVE HE WILL ELECT TO RUN OUT HIS DEVOLUTION HAND, PLAYING FOR TIME. IT IS DIFFICULT, HOWEVER, TO SEE HOW HE CAN DELAY A DECISION BEYOND THE PRESENT PARLIAMENT WHICH WILL RISE IN NOVEMBER. END SUMMARY.

1. FOUR DAY DEBATE ON DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER (REF A) OPENED JANUARY 13 WITH DEFENSIVE, LOW-KEY STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER WILSON WHICH WAS INTERRUPTED FREQUENTLY BY JEERS AND CATCALLS. REASONS FOR WILSON'S TURTLE-LIKE POSTURE BECAME STARKLY EVIDENT AS DEBATE PROGRESSED: SAVE FOR KIND WORDS FROM A FEW LOYAL SCOTTISH LABOR MPS EARLY IN DAY, THE TIDE RAN STRONG AND HIGH AGAINST WHITE PAPER PROPOSALS. CONSERVATIVE LEADER THATCHER, IN ONE OF HER MORE FORCEFUL APPEARANCES ATTACKED THE PROPOSALS AS COSTLY, CUMBERSOME, CONFLICT-PROVOKING AND LEADING TO BREAK-UP OF UK. NATIONALIST PARTIES WERE HARSHLY CRITICAL AS WELL, ARGUING THAT GOVERNMENT' PROPOSALS DO NOT GO FAR ENOUGH, ESPECIALLY AS REGARDS DEVOLVED ECONOMIC POWER. LIBERALS TOO JUMPED ON ANTI-WHITE PAPER BANDWAGON, CALLING FOR FEDERAL PARLIAMENTS IN ENGLAND, AS WELL AS SCOTLAND AND WALES. IF THIS WERE NOT ENOUGH BAD NEWS, LABOR BACKBENCHERS FROM ENGLAND AND WALES JOINED CHORUS OF OPPOSITION.

2. IT IS EVIDENT FROM FIRST DAY'S DEBATE THAT GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION PROPOSALS ARE IN SERIOUS TROUBLE AND THAT "ENGLISH BACKLASH," ESPECIALLY ON LABOR SIDE OF COMMONS, CONSTITUTES GRAVEST THREAT. THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT STRATEGY IS TO LET OPPONENTS TO DEVOLUTION SPEND THEIR FORCE IN 23 DAYS OF DEBATE DURING CURRENT PARLIAMENT, MOST OF WHICH IS SCHEDULED AFTER INTRODUCTION OF "DECOY" DEVOLUTION BILL THAT WILL BE ALLOWED TO DIE AT END OF SESSION. A NEW BILL, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT SENTIMENT EXPRESSED IN DEBATE, WOULD THEN BE INTRODUCED IN NEXT PARLIAMENT. WHILE THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT IT HAS DRAWN OUT THE OPPOSITION, WE SUSPECT THAT GOVERNMENT WAS TAKEN ABACK BY STRENGTH OF BACKLASH.

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3. PROFOUND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LABOR'S FRONT AND BACKBENCHES OVER DEVOLUTION SUGGEST THE BEGINNING OF SITUATION NOT UNLIKE THAT FACED BY PREVIOUS WILSON GOVERNMENT IN 1969 AS RESULT OF ITS EFFORTS TO REFORM INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS STRUCTURES ("IN PLACE OF STRIFE"). IN THAT DEBACLE, WHICH MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE WAS MAJOR FACTOR IN LABOR'S SUBSEQUENT ELECTORAL DEFEAT, GOVERNMENT WAS OUT OF TOUCH WITH ITS BACKBENCHES AND ITS SUPPORTERS. "IN

PLACE OF STRIFE" SPLIT PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY AND
DROVE A WEDGE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND TUC. ALTHOUGH TUC
IS NOT INVOLVED IN DEVOLUTION ISSUE, THERE SEEMS TO BE A
POTENTIAL FOR A SIMILAR DIVISION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT
AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN SCOTLAND WHICH, IN ITS OWN WAY,
MAY BE AS VITAL AS TUC TO A LABOR GOVERNMENT'S CAPACITY
TO GOVERN.

4. FACED WITH THIS SITUATION, WILSON APPEARS TO HAVE
THREE OPTIONS:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 00623

-- TO TRY TO TOUGH IT OUT WITH THE WHITE PAPER PROPOSALS, RISKING SERIOUS DEFEAT IN COMMONS AND A POSSIBLE GENERAL ELECTION IN WHICH LABOR'S TRADITIONAL SUPPORT IN SCOTLAND COULD NOT BE COUNTED UPON;

-- TO REVISE DRASTICALLY ITS DEVOLUTION PROPOSALS. ATTEMPTING TO FIND AN ACCEPTABLE, ALBEIT LOW, COMMON DENOMINATOR WHICH WOULD PASS IN COMMONS, THOUGH AT THE RISK OF ALIENATING SCOTTISH ELECTORATE; OR
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-- TO DECIDE CONSCIOUSLY TO LET COMMONS STALL THE DEVOLUTION BILL, AVOIDING A FINAL VOTE BUT AGAIN RISKING SCOTTISH BACKLASH.

FORTUNATELY FOR WILSON, THERE ARE NO IMMEDIATE TIME PRESSURES ON HIM TO CHOOSE AMONG THESE POLITICALLY UNATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVES. WE SUSPECT, ACCORDINGLY, THE GOVERNMENT WILL CONTINUE TO PURSUE ITS PRESENT STRATEGY. DEFERRING ANY DECISION UNTIL LATER THIS YEAR. IN THE INTERIM, LABOR'S PROBLEMS IN SCOTLAND (REF B) ARE LIKELY TO GROW.

RICHARDSON

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